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THE SEWANEE REVIEW

VOL. XXIV]

APRIL, 1916

[No. 2

THE CHIEF PROBLEM IN SHAKESPEARE

The most puzzling of all Shakespeare's plays is *Troilus and Cressida*. Critic after critic has recognized this fact, and offered explanations more or less ingenious and plausible and more or less destructive of each other. Why is a play containing so much ripe wisdom and noble poetry on the whole so inconclusive, displeasing, disquieting? Why does it leave us with a bad taste in our mouths, as no other Shakespearean play does except *Timon of Athens*? Did he not know what he was doing, or did he dislike his subject? was he expressing a wanton ugly humor, or warning us against a false ideal? Or have we all looked at it too much through modern eyes, and did he and his audience view it in a way which we can imagine only by thorough historical study? To answer such questions will not only interpret the play but will enlighten the whole middle period of Shakespeare's dramatic life. The spirit of the *Troilus* has been projected by critics over a stretch of years which produced most of his tragedies and serious plays. To explain it would be to help explain them; and to explain their author, or at least to remove error about him. Thus the problem which confronted an editor of *Troilus and Cressida* widened into the chief problem in Shakespeare scholarship.

The play was twice issued in quarto in 1609, and was written about 1601-2. Its main source was (almost surely) Caxton's *Recuyell of the Historyes of Troye*, the first book ever printed in the English language, derived from the mediæval Troy romances not from Homer; use was also made of Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*, and of Homer's *Iliad*, perhaps through a French translation, certainly not through Chapman's. The play is believed

by almost everyone not to be all by Shakespeare. Other workmanship is especially traceable in the last seven scenes of act V, and helps to account for the unsatisfying, confused impression left on a reader. Some have believed that he handed it over to a prentice-hand to finish, but a much better founded opinion is that he followed the common practice of basing his play on an earlier one, with less and less alteration toward the end. Through most of the play his hand is unmistakable.

It contains two main stories. In the titular plot, the love between Troilus, son of king Priam, and Cressida, daughter of the traitor-prophet Calchas, is whetted by her uncle, the obscene go-between Pandarus; directly after its consummation she is exchanged for a Trojan prisoner, is wooed in the Greek camp by the skilful Lothario, Diomed, with Troilus as an unseen witness, and is immediately won; the story ends rather inconclusively with Troilus cursing her and her pander-uncle. The other plot deals with the scheme to rouse Achilles from his proud retirement, and with the impending fate of Hector. Achilles, in love with the Trojan princess Polyxena, has flouted the authority of Agamemnon, has withdrawn from the fighting, and consorts only with his ribald hangers-on. The Greek princes receive a chivalrous challenge from Hector to select a champion to fight him in single combat; by the shrewd advice of Ulysses they contrive the selection of Ajax, which excites Achilles' jealousy. After the inconclusive combat the war is renewed, and Achilles treacherously kills Hector. The two parts as they stand form no very attractive story. The love-element is sensual and unworthy, in the war-story there is little heroism, and fighting with foes is largely replaced by scolding among friends. Even this is not all. On each side of the plot there is a character whose main function seems to be flinging mud. Cressida's uncle Pandar, who quite lives up, or down, to his name, at once deprives the love-affair of its Romeo-and-Juliet-like charm by the sly innuendo and leering grossness of an elderly voluptuary. Worse yet, Thersites in the Greek camp, even more deformed in mind than in body, appears as a debased chorus, tearing off the veil and calling things by their foulest names, blackguarding Agamemnon, Achilles, Ajax, and never allowing us to forget

that the cause of the war was the theft of a light woman who was not worth recovering.

Unlovely as this all is, it appears harsher still against the background before which we inevitably see it. Of the three sources of the plot the only two which are familiar to the modern are Chaucer's *Troilus* and the *Iliad*. In Chaucer's poem, the first to familiarize England with the loves of Cressida, one of the charms is the sympathy with which he treats her personality. At the end it is hard to acquiesce in her infidelity, she has always been so discreet, and so lovable. The poet strives in vain against the remorseless march of the traditional tale toward its catastrophe:—

Ne me ne list this sely womman chyde
Ferther than the story wol devyse.
Hir name, alas! is publissed so wyde,
That for hir gilt it oughte y-now suffyse.
And if I mighte excuse hir any wyse,
For she so sory was for hir untrouthe,
Y-wis, I wolde excuse hir yet for routh.

What a contrast with the cool inspection of Shakespeare's Cressida by Ulysses!—

Fie, fie upon her!
There's language in her eye, her cheek, her lip,
Nay, her foot speaks; her wanton spirits look out
At every joint and motive of her body.

But it is not this which has caused the critics most labor and vexation of spirit. If we moderns have been pained at Shakespeare's ruthless usage of the gracious mediæval tale, we have been shocked by his impious hand on the immortal *Iliad*. With Homer even the pitiable Menelaus, whose runaway wife is the cause of the war, is the "beloved of Ares"; the greatest charm of Homer is that *all* his personages are noble and godlike. None of Shakespeare's are, except Hector, who is exalted only at the expense of Achilles. In Homer, when Agamemnon's ambassadors come to Achilles' tent to urge him to forget his wrongs and reënter the war, they find him playing the lyre, and though he refuses their prayer he does so courteously, and royally feasts them. Shakespeare's Achilles flouts the king himself with pert insolence, and spends his days lolling on a lazy

bed roaring with laughter over Patroclus' mimicry of the other Grecian princes. Unimpressive as most of the Greeks are, none fares so ill as Homer's "heaven-born Ajax." Sensible as we must be of this harsh contrast, how can we help being equally puzzled and repelled by Shakespeare's play? Why does he seem to turn Chaucer's sympathy into scorn, Homer's serenity into discord, and his heroism into pettiness? Why this seeming blight on the most kindly, and the most harmonious, of poets?

In devising answers the critics have been industrious and at times imaginative. Some have found reasons personal, moral, or literary. The personal reasons given have been: a generally bitter, disillusioned mood;¹ disgust with love and women;² jealousy,—a desire to contradict and rival Homer or his translator Chapman.³ These personal reasons were characteristic of nineteenth-century criticism, which has been so deeply interested in Shakespeare the man; earlier, and German, criticism tended to abstract and moral explanations. Was he contrasting the Greeks with the Trojans, to the moral disadvantage of the Greeks;⁴ embodying a sort of Germanic or romantic reaction against Hellenism;⁵ pointing out the moral defects of ancient civilization as contrasted with Christianity;⁶ or, on the contrary, satirizing mediæval and chivalric literature and ideals?⁷ Critics early and late have conceived the reasons as literary. Shakespeare has been thought to symbolize certain contemporary events or conditions, in politics or among his fellow-dramatists;⁸ to be giving its fling to a gaily mocking mood in an irresponsible comedy, sparing neither knighthood nor herodism;⁹ to be treating a popular subject in a popular way, in order to please the populace.¹⁰ Other explanations of the unsympathetic tone would

¹ Furnivall, Knight, Dowden, Herford, ten Brink, Koch, Brandes, Luce, Boas, Figgis, Deighton, Bradley. All these groupings of critics naturally represent their views only roughly.

² Brandes, Frank Harris.

³ Gervinus, Vischer, Furnivall, Boas, Hessen, Harris, Brandes, Mabie.

⁴ Gildon (1710), Coleridge, Stapfer.

⁵ Goethe, Rapp.

⁶ Ulrici, Knight, Palmer, Moltke.

⁷ Schlegel, Hertzberg, Boas.

⁸ Fleay, Herford, Wolff, Poël, Acheson.

⁹ Dr. Johnson, Ulrici, Knight, Stapfer, Ludwig. The earliest bit of criticism on the play, in the preface to the Quarto, extols it as a comedy.

¹⁰ Stebbing, Collier, Hebler.

make it more or less unintentional and unconscious. The apparent irony on Homer has been recognized as inevitable in a play drawn mainly from the mediæval Troy-story.¹¹ The unpleasantness has been attributed largely to a sense of confusion,¹² perhaps due to the fact that an earlier play underlies this one.¹³ The apparent debasing of the characters has been felt as more apparent than real, and as due to their realism; they have ceased to be heroes and become men.¹⁴ Many critics, especially the earlier, show little or no consciousness of an actually disagreeable tone;¹⁵ Dryden, who, if anyone, should have resented an assault on ancient epic, felt the play to be not ignoble but only rude and irregular, and was especially pleased with Pandarus and Thersites! Finally, some have given up the tone of the play as impossible of explanation.¹⁶ But if any reader will have various explanations to choose from, *circumspicat*, here is God's plenty, in all conscience.

If one were to write a full criticism of all these views, nobody would read it. Some of them are superficial, facile, and too *a priori*; some of them misrepresent Shakespeare and his methods; some of them are true as far as they go, and point in the right direction. An instantly convincing explanation of a work produced under conditions far in the past and by a little-known personality (as Shakespeare's is and will remain, in spite of us), may be impossible to arrive at; is certainly impossible without restoring those conditions so far as we can, and without analyzing the play itself, rather than merely our impressions of it. But if we sketch in the background, briefly summarizing a large amount of fresh detail, and ascertain and study just what it is in the play which causes our impression, we have at least a good chance of coming near the truth. The tough old world is rightly suspicious of those who announce new-found keys to the kingdom of heaven; suspicious even of new keys to unlock Shakespeare's

¹¹ Gildon, Schlegel, Guizot, Eitner, Elze, Peabody, Wolff, Lee.

¹² Duke (1679), Bell's editor (1774), Verplanck, Hudson, Hebler, Raleigh.

¹³ Verplanck, Dyce, Verity.

¹⁴ Gildon, Coleridge, Knight, Macaulay, Heinrich Heine.

¹⁵ Dryden, Gildon, Johnson, Godwin, Coleridge, Hazlitt, Verplanck, Knight, Stapfer.

¹⁶ Swinburne, Brander Matthews, perhaps Tolstoi.

heart. But a more modest effort to reconcile and amplify such sane and penetrating criticism as has already been offered for the chief problem in the greatest body of poetry in the world will find a hearing. It may even be welcomed if it is seen to undermine especially the most widely known and comprehensive of the false explanations, the theory that not only this play but many others nearly contemporary reveal a long-lasting bitter and pessimistic frame of mind; a theory which seems to have occurred to no one before the later nineteenth century.

No traditional story was so popular in the Elizabethan age as that of the siege of Troy and some of its episodes: because of its antiquity and undying beauty, of the fame and greatness of the early writers who had treated it, and to some extent of the rooted tradition that the British were descendants of the Trojans. After the close of the Middle Ages its popularity had increased rather than diminished, among both educated and uneducated. And nothing better than this story illustrates the true relation of the age to the near and the remoter past,—the continuation of mediæval tradition and taste, especially among the little-educated, and the (often uncouth) modification of it by an increased knowledge and a sharpened understanding of the classics. To Chaucer and the romancers were added a more intelligently read Virgil and Ovid, and a new-found Homer. But for the most part they were subdued to what they worked in, the romantic and rather undiscerning taste of the not highly educated.

There is curious evidence of the popularity of the Troy-story in the talk of illiterate people in Shakespeare, especially in the historical plays. With his clear-sighted veracity of imagination we may well suppose that the characters and events of the story were really familiar to such people, and of all sources of knowledge easiest of all is to believe that they knew the story through stage-plays. Falstaff's harum-scarum hangers-on are particularly fond of such language; Doll Tearsheet, doubtless no great reader, tells him, "Thou art as valorous as Hector of Troy, worth five of Agamemnon" (*2 Henry IV*, II, iv, 237). There are a round dozen of such remarks by Doll, Pistol, the Host, and the Clown, assuredly not bookish folk, in *Henry IV* and *V*,

Merry Wives, and *Twelfth Night*. The fact that these signs of distinctively popular interest seem to be confined to plays written between 1598 and 1602 is evidence, confirmed by other matters, that Shakespeare's play was written when its subject was in especial vogue; nothing is clearer than that Shakespeare as a rule gave his auditors what they wanted (though bettering it). The use as verbs and common nouns even to the present day of such words as *Hector*, *Myrmidon*, *Trojan*, may perhaps be traced in part to Elizabethan plays.

For the surviving plays on this as on other subjects are to those that have perished almost as the driftwood on the shores of the world to that which covers the seas. Some eighteen references to unknown sixteenth and early seventeenth-century plays on various parts of it prove that at least nearly that number are lost, and probably many more. Four plays are more or less extant, and four non-dramatic works; in other plays the story forms episodes, and countless allusions show its familiarity. Besides this, Lydgate's and Caxton's popular mediæval versions of the Troy-story, and Chaucer's *Troilus*, were each printed from two to nine times in Shakespeare's day or before. Of the four non-dramatic works far the most interesting is Thomas Heywood's little-known *Troia Britanica*, never printed since 1609, which tells the story of Troy, and more too, in some 13,000 lines. The poem shows journalistic as well as poetic skill; in its title and in its latter part it flatters the popular belief that the British were descended from the Trojans, and in its manner it imitates the Italian Renaissance epics then admired in England. The other three works show much the same desire to hit popular fancy. Of the plays two have only recently become accessible, and are little known. One, extant only in a fragmentary outline, dates from about 1599 and agreed closely with Shakespeare's in scope, in emphasizing the degraded love-story and Achilles' pride, and in exalting Hector. The second is a poor thing in the Welsh language, dating from some time before 1613, perhaps from 1595-1610; it is mostly a would-be dramatization of Chaucer's poem, but shows clearly that its author had witnessed the performance of some of the Elizabethan plays on the siege of Troy. More important is *The Iron Age*, a bipartite play by

the well-loved dramatist Thomas Heywood, printed in 1632 after a long and successful run on the boards, but written certainly before 1607, probably before Shakespeare's play (1601-2), and perhaps as early as 1596. This "bright, easy-going, desultory" play, as A. C. Swinburne called it, is the work of a young man full of uncritical enthusiasm for ancient myth and modern drama, too eager to pour the one into the mould of the other to care how he did it. With all its crudity we must needs admire the perpetual vitality of it all. But the most interesting matter about *The Iron Age* is its likeness to Shakespeare's play. While it develops the Troilus and Cressida story but little, there is a general parallelism in the *dramatis personæ* and the plot, and an amazing likeness in the personalities, talk, and actions of Thersites and Ajax, the two characters who more than any others in Shakespeare's play produce the effect of bitterness and of satire on ancient life. The likeness is far too great to be a coincidence; chronology and other matters make it hard to believe that either dramatist imitated the other; the easiest view, favored also by other evidence in the *Troilus*, is that both made use of a third play.

How does all this background alter the aspect of Shakespeare's drama? In the first place, its subject was extremely popular in two senses,—was widely liked, and appealed to the masses. This is attested by various allusions and by two dozen or so of other works, dramatic and otherwise, mostly covering the same ground. In contents, characters, and incidents his version is substantially like the others that are known; and his sources are the same. More important is the matter of tone. In the other works, as in his, it is mediæval or early modern, amorous, loosely chivalric in the contemporary manner. These other works bring to our mind's eye no picture of white and plastic forms against a background of immortal brightness. They are not simple, dignified, unified. In other words, they are not in the least "classic," in the sense used by æstheticians. The material is treated just as any other would be treated, with no sense that it is entitled to especial reverence or reserve; it was valued as a mine of romantic and exciting incident and of vivid human character. The same is true of Shakespeare's play.

The Iron Age especially enables us to say that the *Troilus* is not wholly singular in spirit, which in the two averages up nearly the same. In Shakespeare things are merely intensified, for good and for ill, which gives his work less internal harmony and unity of spirit than the other shows. Nothing in *The Iron Age* rises to the stately dignity reached by Shakespeare's Ulysses and Hector; nothing descends quite to the loathsome venom of his Thersites, the silliness of his Ajax, the impotent sensuality of his Pandarus. *The Iron Age* no more than the *Troilus* shows any consciousness that classical heroes are entitled to the reserved and ideal treatment which belongs to a semi-canonized tradition. Even the philhellene Swinburne felt "that the brutalization or degradation of the godlike figures of Ajax and Achilles is only less offensive in the lesser than in the greater poet's work." A careful reading of Heywood's play will give most people a very different attitude to Shakespeare's than they had before, unless we gratuitously assume that his feeling toward Homer must have been totally different from that of all his contemporaries. No one will suspect a bitter or hostile spirit in Heywood.

Now we leave external for internal matters. First of all, it is surprising that critics have not more fully analyzed the play and its tone. Many see nothing but bitterness in it; others see only humor and wisdom. There is truth in both views, for there is scurrility and there is nobility; *but they are not mixed*. Nothing could be more entirely weighty and worthy than the personalities and talk in Act I, scene iii, with its solid wisdom; in II, ii, in III, iii, in most of IV, v, with its knightly cordiality, in V, iii, with its heroism and pathos. These scenes seem to be largely Shakespeare's own addition to the story, and only a very prejudiced reader can fail to see that he wrote them with perfect seriousness and sympathy. We are always liable to prejudice, because we inevitably come to the play with our minds full of Homer; but Shakespeare came to it with his mind mostly filled with Caxton, and he has risen far above Caxton in dignity and beauty.

Here we must consider the attitude to Homer natural in Shakespeare. So far as he knew him, he doubtless felt toward

him much as Heywood and others did, and quite otherwise than we do. The main point is this,—we must leave the absolute for the relative conception of literature. The normal human reaction to Homer is not always one and the same, as the history of his reputation will prove. A poet's renown becomes static sometimes only because people cease to read him. To Shakespeare, not a much-schooled man, the *Iliad* was one book among many; read probably (if by him at all) in a crude translation, it may even have seemed to him a little thin and unreal. Supreme creative genius does not separate a man from his contemporaries in tastes and everything else. On Shakespeare's part an attitude toward the Greeks like that of such moderns as Swinburne and Keats is unthinkable; the austere and serene background of Greek sculpture and architecture against which we see them was utterly unknown to him. Anyone not wholly under Homer's spell would have moments of amazement over the cause of the Trojan War. Even Horace could sum up the *Iliad* thus:—

Seditione, dolis, scelere atque libidine et ira
Iliacos intra muros peccatur, et extra.

Horace was neither embittered nor anti-classical, but he had no illusions. No more had Shakespeare. But he was neither conscious of debasing through the necessity of humanizing and dramatizing, nor conscious of incongruity through the inevitable introduction of chivalry. He who made Cleopatra propose to Charmian a game of billiards had not a very lively sense of historical fitness. An open-minded reading of the chivalric scenes, the most original part of the play, should make it forever impossible to regard the Shakespeare of *Troilus and Cressida* as full merely of weary disillusion and angry pain.

The chief vehicles of the truly harsh unsympathetic spirit are three. The tone embodied in Ajax, Thersites, and the love-motive does need comment. Ajax generally cuts a thoroughly comic figure; but his absurdity is partly as a foil to his opponent in the single-combat, the always noble Hector, and was traditional in Elizabethan and earlier literature. Passages even in the *Iliad* would tend to make him ridiculous to the humorous Elizabethans. In Sophocles' *Ajax* the hero goes mad, and

whips and slaughters cattles thinking them his personal enemies. This to the Elizabethans could not have seemed otherwise than comic. The same pitiable and somewhat absurd conception of him as arrogant and stupid is found in Plato, Lucian, Apuleius, and Ovid (in a passage widely familiar in Shakespeare's day), and is greatly intensified and spread in Elizabethan literature; and finally the clever Sir John Harington, in a little-known skit, *The Metamorphosis of Ajax*, founded on a vulgar pun on his name and parodying Ovid, abased him still farther. In Shakespeare the nine references to Ajax outside this play mostly harmonize with the contemporary notion, and in the *Troilus* the vulgar pun appears. The keynote of Ajax here is paradox (I, ii, etc.), and paradox was inevitable, for he is a combination of the Ajax of Homer, who fights a mighty and chivalrous duel with the heroic Hector, and the traditional Elizabethan Ajax, a mass of absurdity and egotism.

Thersites, too, is entirely explicable. Quite definitely the Fool of the play, he is merely filled in from the sketch in the second book of the *Iliad*; in Shakespeare he says at large what Homer says he says. Shocking as it was to mid-Victorian Hellenolatry, hateful as it is to us, to read the epithets he applies to Agamemnon and his peers, and to see him brawling and scuffling with that undignified trio, Achilles, Patroclus, and Ajax, when the play is witnessed Thersites and his deformed spite and ugly half-truths recede into the remote littleness where they belong. We have been in the stately presence of the Greeks and they have even prepared us for his venom (I, iii) before we ever see him (II, i). Rowe, Shakespeare's first editor, found him merely a "Master Piece of ill Nature, and satyrical Snarling." Elsewhere the poet gives us lovers, ninnies, doubters, murderers, raised to the n^{th} power; here he gives us likewise a railer. He was not a cynic because he drew Thersites, nor a murderer because he drew Macbeth. Thersites must have vastly pleased the groundlings, and brought in many a sixpence.

As to the love-story, his attitude to it was the only one possible in his day. Chaucer, though he would fain have excused Crisyede, had left her without excuse, later writers had degraded and chastised her by striking her with leprosy, in

Shakespeare's day her good name was gone forever, and she was merely a by-word for a light woman; he could no more have made her chaste and loyal than he could have given Cleopatra what the elderly English ladies called "the home-life of our own dear Queen." In her descent she had dragged down her lover and uncle, whose name Pandarus had long become that of his trade. But Troilus as a man and fighter stands high in grace, and all three are certainly lifelike. In a word, there is no lack of interest in the love-story, and as much sympathy as its history allowed.

The facts seem to favor some such explanation of *Troilus and Cressida* as this: Shakespeare found it expedient to make over an older play (or at least to write) on this highly popular subject, so popular and so familiar that the plot and largely the characters were fixed and unmalleable, as in the English historical plays. He did it with no great liking, except for the more masculine and statesmanlike scenes. Homer, little known to him before and now read, if by him at all, probably in a poor translation, took no particular hold on him; he admitted the light of common day to the *sanctum sanctorum*, and followed the late mediæval works which were the chief authority for the Trojan War even in the sixteenth century. To relieve the heaviness of the deliberations which form so much of the play, he made fun for his popular audience by a comic Ajax and Homer's ribald Thersites. He did not care deeply enough for most of the Greek heroes to shrink from his Fool's slander of them; which unquestionably would produce far less effect on the stage, where we should see for ourselves that they do not deserve it. Sated with, perhaps reacting from, the ordinary light romantic love, indeed finding it incompatible with his material, yet not wishing to omit the love-motive in a play with a popular appeal, he produced a masterly study of an alluring wanton and the first passion of a full-blooded, very young man. The most valuable pointer for interpreting the work is the probability that he wrote it without the deep interest he put on the great tragedies of this period. It is no longer possible to think of him as guided merely by his own taste and temper in choosing his material from Caxton, Chaucer, and Homer (supposing him not wholly guided by an

earlier play); he did not care greatly to modify the literary tradition, as is clear from the close resemblance of the play to *The Iron Age*, and from its general parallelism to several other works and probably to the numerous lost ones. The call for a play on a vulgarly popular subject, the lack of our feeling of traditional veneration for certain of its sources, want of deep interest in the popular part of the play, will largely account for its tone and temper. In their desire to banish all mystery, critics have created much mystery where there is little. The undeniably unpleasant effect of the play some have seen is due quite as much to its confusion and want of internal harmony as to anything else. We have chivalrous gallantry, stupid and cowardly savagery, stately dignity, voluptuousness without charm, weighty wisdom, low scurrility. He poured new wine into old bottles, he sewed a piece of new cloth into an old garment and the rent was made worse. As to whether what has been said fully accounts for the spirit of the play, or whether there is a slight harsh sediment not dissolved by this *aqua regia*, perhaps opinion will differ; a great deal of it, if not most, is certainly thus accounted for. While we need not be Shavian enough to claim the foregoing as the only possible explanation, one may ask if it is not a fair substitute for the current ones. It is less simple; but a simple explanation of the procedure of so complex a being as the matured artist, while it may please logically and readily pierce to the seat of conviction, often satisfies less than a less simple one does. The logically simple is sometimes the historically improbable. It is temperate enough to say that the supposition of an unpleasant spirit in Shakespeare is not required by this play, and so far as the belief that this spirit is visible in many plays of the same period depends on the *Troilus*, it depends on a very feeble support.

But if this has been its main basis, other plays have been called on to help, let us briefly see how reliably. First there are the great tragedies, dating probably between 1600 and 1607. If it is asked why he wrote them just at this time and near together, the answer may be that after one or two lighter attempts at tragedy he wisely waited till the maturity of his powers and experience, till the thews of his imagination were

strong enough to bear the enormous weight; perhaps also, as there is some reason to believe, till the theatre particularly demanded tragedy. As to pessimism, it is needless to argue that tragedies as such do not lower, but raise, the dignity of human nature. In such a play as *Lear* Shakespeare descended far, no man farther, into the abyss of human sin and pain, but he does not emerge to tell us that down there all is vileness or vacancy. In his direst tragedies human nature seems to him kindly even in its folly, touching even in its weakness and grand even in its evil. In every one, even in *Lear*, there is something which partly reconciles us to the general ruin. Like all great artists, Shakespeare gives us something better than reality; which is their function. In a word, his great tragedies are not pessimistic.

But other plays have been used as contributory evidence, *All's Well that Ends Well* and *Measure for Measure*. Their dates are exceedingly uncertain, but even if we acquiesce in those often accepted, 1598-1601 and 1603, we shall find their testimony still more uncertain. Neither play is much liked. In the former a woman strong in mind and character allows herself to be forced as a wife, indeed forces herself, on a man unworthy of her; most readers agree with Dr. Johnson, who could not "reconcile his heart to Bertram," a raw cad, yet "dismissed to happiness." It makes us like the play little the better that Coleridge calls Helena "the loveliest of Shakespeare's characters," or that Dr. Lounsbury is right in saying that in life we should sympathize with Bertram in rejecting a woman whom he did not love. *Measure for Measure* introduces us to a society sexually corrupt, the most corrupt person of all being the seeming-holy Angelo, seeming holy even to himself (though the Duke had doubted him). Isabella, herself "a thing enskied and sainted," lends her countenance to a dubious intrigue. The general moral slackness of the life pictured in the play has struck critics the more because of the easy-going comfort in which everybody ends.¹⁷ Now to what extent can we agree that these plays show

¹⁷ Here as elsewhere critics often disquiet themselves in vain. Several of them complain that the Duke decides on marriage with Isabella the novice without consulting the Mother Superior. Just so Shakespeare sends Hamlet back from England without telling us where he bought his ticket.

signs of pessimism? In the first place, they show nothing of the kind except in the main plots as already described; there are no harsh *obiter dicta*, nor such despairing generalizations as are uttered by Hamlet, Macbeth, Lear. Rather, these plays may be explained much as the *Troilus* was explained. Critics have noted that they are singularly rough and uneven in style, giving inferior replicas of characters and conceptions found in Shakespeare's better plays; defects which we may put down to indifference and haste. Both plays are founded on the Italian novels which were so vastly popular in Shakespeare's day, a type of fiction in which ingenuity and romance of incident leave little room for probability, good sense, and moral tone. He takes his cue from them. At the end of each play (and earlier too in *All's Well*) he casts all prosaic probability behind him for the sake of an effective and dramatic scene, with revolutions, recognitions, and all the rest of it. The older criticism expected Shakespeare to be always an oracle; as a matter of fact, sometimes he was and sometimes not. Nor was he always bound to be on his moral high horse. If he had been he would never have owned New Place or so much of the Globe Theatre. This may be unideal, but it is a fact. So on the one hand he may be regarded as having treated a crude popular sort of subject in a facile manner. On the other, he found certain elements which must have been intensely interesting to him. In each play he gives us at least one fine and beautiful character wrought with supreme care and skill. The more lifelike these characters are, the harsher the contrast with their absurd traditional situations, the worse the rent made by the new cloth in the old garment. There is no want of insight and morality in the portrayal of Angelo. But there is no pessimism here. It is only the blind optimist, like the ostrich with its head in the sand, that resents being forced to look at the unpleasing. It is only the superficial who sees pessimism in the revelation of hidden evil. Why should not Shakespeare do once in a way what Thackeray does constantly? Yet lovers of Thackeray know he was no pessimist. In *All's Well* Shakespeare may have found an attraction in the very difficulty of making Helena still lovely in spite of her unlovely false position. Each play may have served as a school

before he devoted himself to the supremely exacting themes of tragedy. It might even be maintained that criticism need not explain these plays at all, that there is nothing to explain. Why should Shakespeare not have written them? He wrote pretty much all other kinds. So far as he is responsible for *Titus Andronicus* and *Timon of Athens*, he gives a far more disgusting view of human nature. No doubt they too would have been more generally brought in to support the theory, and with far more plausibility, had they not luckily been written long before and long after. They too may be explained by the popularity of their subjects and styles. There is something more like analytic geometry than analytic criticism in using the precise amount of pleasure in human nature which this or that critic derives from each play to plot a sort of curve of Shakespeare's optimism.

The reasons alleged for this supposed ugly state of mind are neither sufficient nor solid. The Sonnets seem to indicate a relation with an alluring and fickle woman, thought to have left in him disgust with love and contempt for the sex. In spite of the uncertainty as to the date and interpretation of the Sonnets, such an experience might be reflected in the love-motive of *Troilus and Cressida*, though hardly in the other two plays; as to whether it is enough to account for everything opinions may differ. But his attitude toward the loves of Troilus and Cressida is more certainly accounted for by their literary history, and there is another way of accounting for the general lack of interest and sympathy for love in the plays of this period. In his youth Shakespeare had written of it much, and with great relish; in his later years, with a poetic and paternal spirit, as in *The Winter's Tale* and *The Tempest*, he was to write of love again, in a particularly simple and ingenuous form. Is it surprising that halfway between, at the age of about forty, after wide experience of life, the subject should for a time have lost its intense interest for him; that, when he wrote of it at all, it should be in its more unusual and even harsher forms? This does not mean that he was embittered toward love and women, still less toward life,—the loves of Desdemona and even of Lady Macbeth show no such spirit. If any one thing is clear about Shakespeare, it is that

life interested him in all its phases; no part of it is more interesting than all the ways of a man with a maid. Less likely yet are other supposed explanations of the supposed pessimism. One is half-ashamed to mention, and wholly ashamed to attribute to the most lovable of nineteenth-century scholars, the suggestion that Shakespeare was sore over some neglect. There is little more validity in another. In 1601, for conspiracy against the queen, the Earl of Essex was executed, and the Earl of Southampton, a confederate, was imprisoned and in danger of death. We know that Southampton had been friendly to Shakespeare, and one of the more plausible interpretations of the Sonnets identifies with him the male friend in the earlier ones. Let us take all this in the most conciliatory spirit; let us for the moment suppose that the ardor of the Sonnets expresses the poet's real feeling; can we believe that, because his friend was imprisoned, and his friend's friend executed, as they richly deserved, life turned for years to dust and ashes in Shakespeare's mouth? If the death of his only son in 1596 left no strong mark on his plays, can we believe that the imprisonment of his friend did? Even taken all together, these guesses hardly strengthen the pessimism theory.

There remains one point, an important one. The drama in general is the most impersonal form of literary art. While lyric poetry by its very definition often expresses mood, one need not argue that more extensive and more creative work has generally no close connection with the poet's state of mind. Creative artists will tell us such work is more likely to contrast with than to express it. Would anyone fancy from the narrative of *Paradise Lost* the hope, disappointment, and despair which Milton must have been living through? Of the drama all this is especially true. While some moderns have used it to express their personal feelings and convictions, no one will deny that generally the Elizabethans wrote with no such purpose, but in an objective and practical spirit. With so marvelously self-controlled and impersonal a writer as Shakespeare was (to disregard the theory under discussion), all this is eminently true. Critics have been straining their eyes in vain to pierce the veil. Humanity is grateful to Shakespeare, and seeks to know its ben-

efactor, at his worst rather than not at all. Of late years there has been an almost touching desire to draw near him through a sacramental real presence in his plays. Some of the devotion which was once the portion of the Bible alone has now passed away to other great books. The pessimism theory has been developed especially by those late nineteenth-century critics who have sought to draw the uttermost farthing of personal information from his plays, and to relate them to what is otherwise known of his life. But how little we have really learned thus he can see who reads critically Dr. Brandes's brilliant book on Shakespeare, and sees that it is not history but epic imagination. Had it not been for such attempts to extract biographical sunbeams from cucumbers, we should probably never have heard of the pessimism theory, certainly not if other adequate explanations of the plays had been at hand. There may be more truth, or less truth, in the interpretations I have suggested; they are at least as acceptable as the other theory, for the burden of proof lies heavily on its advocates. We should scrutinize rigorously a theory with such far-reaching implications. Unless we are forced to it are we ready to believe that in the prime of his powers, yet past his first youth, Shakespeare was driven for years to this hateful self-expression? That he coarsened women, sneered at love, degraded the heroic, to assuage for the moment his own angry pain?

‘With this key
Shakespeare unlocked his heart’ once more!
Did Shakespeare? If so, the less Shakespeare he!

Of course Shakespeare expressed himself in his plays, but (so far as we can see) it was the whole self that had resulted from his whole experience of life, not his temporary self in an instantaneous rebound from this or that immediate experience. Prenatal impressions did not determine the characters of his literary offspring. Criticism is moving farther and farther from the eighteenth-century view of him as a closet theorizer, and the mid-nineteenth-century idea of a closet dramatist, to that of a practical dramatist who had practical and theatrical reasons for what he did. No one has the right to assert, and no one does assert, that no pessimism may underlie the plays we have been

discussing, that there is no unexplained residuum. But if on the whole they are better interpreted another way, we need think the less of such disagreeable possibilities. In spite of a natural desire to know Shakespeare the man, we may have to be content with Matthew Arnold's—

Others abide our question. Thou art free.
We ask and ask — Thou smilest and art still,
Out-topping knowledge. . . . Better so.

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